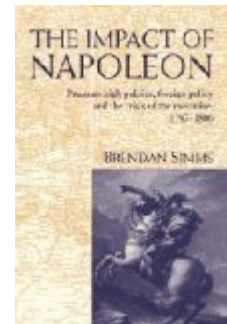


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Brendan Simms. *The Impact of Napoleon: Prussian High Politics, Foreign Policy and the Crisis of the Executive, 1797-1806.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. xvi + 390 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-45360-8.

Reviewed by Anthony J. Steinhoff (The University of Chicago)
Published on H-German (September, 1997)



Most recent scholarship on Prussia for the period 1789-1815 has focused either on social and cultural conditions or the reforms following and responses to Prussia's humiliation at the battles of Jena and Auerstaedt in 1806. *The Impact of Napoleon* sheds new light on the more neglected, yet critical domain of Prussian high politics and foreign policy development during the first decade of Frederick William III's reign (1797-1806). Brendan Simms rejects the traditional picture of a dramatic change in Prussian policy or institutional arrangements after 1797. The system itself had fundamental weaknesses that became manifest in the presence of a weak and indecisive monarch, mainly the lack of central institutions apart from the monarch and the intense rivalry among advisors and councilors for the favor of the king, the only source of political power and influence. Ministers acted, but only insofar as they carried out the king's will. Indeed, the very lack of change in the conduct of high politics and foreign policy after 1797 caused the entire state to buckle and then collapse once faced with the escalating French interest in Germany after 1804. This, contends Simms, was the impact of Napoleon. In the process of constructing this position, he also challenges many assumptions about the nature and course of politics in the final decades of old regime Prussia.

Although Simms has organized it differently, *The Impact of Napoleon* really falls into two parts: an analysis of the structures of power and an examination of how these worked in light of the military and diplomatic events of 1804-1806. Simms's study of the former is masterful and generally quite compelling. The entire Prussian political system was geared towards enabling the king to make important decisions, namely, to set foreign policy. Ministers, advisors and councilors—whether noble or

bourgeois—had no real autonomy. Furthermore, unless they had made it into the inner circle (the “antechamber of power”) around the king, where foreign policy was discussed, these prominent individuals had no substantive influence on Prussian high politics. Hence, Simms denies the contention that significant aristocratic or bureaucratic limits to royal authority existed in the final decades of old regime Prussia.

Insisting on the primacy of foreign policy in Prussia, Simms observes that it was little influenced by corporate interests or even ideology. Rather, foreign policy was shaped by two factors. First, it reflected geopolitical concerns, namely Prussia's geographic extensiveness and precarious position between Russia, Austria, and France. Whereas Frederick the Great used geopolitics to justify aggression, Frederick William used geopolitical arguments to defend and enforce the policy of neutrality dictated by the Treaty of Basel (1795). This formed the background of all diplomatic activity until 1806. Second, largely because of Frederick William's own lack of initiative, foreign policy unfolded in consequence of the impassioned infighting within the antechamber of power for control of the foreign policy executive. Simms contends that this contest of personal ambitions for the gaining and retaining of royal access and favor, *not* corporate interests nor ideology, drove the articulation of foreign policy in Prussia. Significantly, this state of affairs also paralyzed the entire decision-making process of the state at a time when unity and action were needed.

The final two sections of *The Impact of Napoleon* (“Events” and “Responses”) investigate the impact of the events of 1804-1806 on these structures: high politics, foreign policy, and the Prussian executive. Simms re-

veals that the policy of neutrality had certain short term advantages for Prussia; it ushered in a brief period of calm and prosperity and permitted minor administrative reforms (like the *Allgemeine Landrecht*). However, efforts to centralize the development of foreign policy failed. Moreover, neutrality did not provide the measure of long-term security Prussia craved. There remained both the threat of a Franco-Russian alliance as well as being drawn into conflict with France because of the existence of British Hanover. Indeed, as Simms exposes, Frederick William's scrupled refusal to claim Hanover for Prussia led to France's occupation of the province in 1802, which served as the prelude for heightened French involvement in Germany.

Relying on a wide range of private and public sources, many of them previously unused, Simms shows how Prussia's diplomatic posturing after 1802—its efforts to mediate a peace between France and Germany and to consolidate its position in North Germany—turned on the rivalries of personal ambition in the antechamber of power. In short, foreign policy imperatives and high politics converged, making foreign policy an extension of the high stakes game for royal favor and confidence. Rather than being an all-out struggle for power, though, Prussian politics polarized around the dominant set of adversarial relationships at a given time (e.g. Haugwitz vs. Alvensleben, Haugwitz vs. Hardenberg). This dynamic, for example, explains the twists in the positions on whether Prussia should join the Third Coalition. It also emerges tellingly in the wrangling after Austria's defeat at Schonbrunn in 1805, leading to the Treaty of Paris in 1806. Simms concludes that while the politicians surrounding Frederick William often agreed on the goals of foreign policy and even executive reform, they disagreed violently about how to achieve them, for in these particulars one aimed both to consolidate power and remove one's rivals from a position of influence.

It is in these final stages of the book that Simms's argument begins to unravel. In the conclusion, he asserts that "the tide of events [Napoleon] unleashed in 1804 was to have a powerfully solvent effect on policies, politics and structures in the old Prussia" (p. 338). The choice of the date of 1804 is perplexing, for it really is Napoleon's occupation of Hanover that began closer contact between France and Prussia. Moreover, Simms's analysis of Prussian high politics and foreign affairs after 1802 really shows the absence of fundamental structural change. The king still controlled the executive and the ministers still competed, albeit with higher stakes, for his favor and the power that it brought. French wishes and desires increas-

ingly shaped how Frederick William could express his favor (e.g. the public exclusion of Hardenberg from grace between 1805-1806), but in the final analysis the high political competition among ministers determined foreign policy and executive action. Only Prussia's defeat at Jena altered this fundamental aspect of the political landscape.

Simms's arguments about the importance of foreign policy, and especially high politics, are also undermined by several curious decisions. First, the introduction really does not present an argument, but only an assertion of the value of a certain methodological framework. Hence, the reader must read between the lines in order to fathom Simms's intentions. Second, the division of the book into three sections instead of only two unnecessarily fragments the book's essentially chronological argument and leads to the repetition of information (especially in Chapter Eight). Third, and more seriously, Simms only asserts the primacy of foreign politics, relying heavily on his discussion of the structural relationship between foreign and domestic affairs to do so. This, however, does not itself constitute proof. Moreover, given the way the argument actually develops, it is not evident that such a claim is even necessary.

Simms's decision to devote his last substantial chapter to Prussian reform attempts before 1806 is indicative of a different type of weakness in the book. Simms justifies this approach as a way to show how the high political dynamic worked outside of the sphere of foreign policy. Yet as a final chapter in a book dedicated to *foreign policy*, this only serves to confuse the reader about the author's intention. One senses that the real reason to include this section was to engage further in historiographical debate, which Simms does a bit too willingly, even if the issue was somewhat tangential. One final peculiarity is Simms's position on translating citations. None of the French citations are translated, whereas German quotations are always translated with the original source provided in the footnotes. Perhaps Simms assumes of his reader more familiarity with French than German and attaches some special importance to the German text; neither position is sufficiently clear. On balance, though, this study's first-rate account of the mechanisms of politics and foreign affairs in old regime Prussia makes Simms's work a welcome contribution to the historical literature.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Anthony J. Steinhoff. Review of Simms, Brendan, *The Impact of Napoleon: Prussian High Politics, Foreign Policy and the Crisis of the Executive, 1797-1806*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. September, 1997.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1288>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.